

# Workplace demotivators have to be taken

**A**CCORDING to Dean R. Spitzer, "Demotivators are those nagging, daily occurrences that frustrate employees and cause them to reduce, consciously or unconsciously, the amount of productive energy they use in their jobs. Demotivators are counterproductive practices that have crept into an organization and become part of its normal operations more as a result of neglect than design."

Demotivators basically exist because they are allowed to, and they remain because little is done about them. Too many managers in Pakistan are isolated from the daily frustrations of their workforce and simply do not appreciate the seriousness of the demotivation problem. They underestimate the importance of what they consider to be 'minor irritations', and fail to realize that a demotivating behaviour tends to affect people far out of proportion to its actual size. In time, demotivators can even harm employees' psychological health.

Some of the most potent demotivators that are common to most organizations in Pakistan are:

**POLITICS:** This is the most common of all demotivations in the Pakistani workplace. It involves competition for power; for influence, resources, favours and course promotions. The employee who attends all his bosses' parties, carry around political weight. Regardless of his or her professional worth, the one who gets ahead is the one who knows all the right stuff to say.

Politics usually operates according to unwritten rules of success that send subtle, ambiguous and anxiety-producing messages to employees about politically correct behaviours such as whom to fear, whom to appease, whom to avoid and whom to blame. A few employees may pride themselves in being savvy,

but organizational politics leaves most people feeling helpless and demoralized. People are just too scared to go against their own bosses, even when they know that the bosses are wrong and they have feasible and sometimes brilliant ideas to improve productivity. This is why there is no innovation, and status quo remains for years, producing inefficient and ineffective management.

Politics thrives on subjectivity and secretiveness. Defeating it, therefore, demands that decision-making be based on objectives and well-documented criteria. Quite impossible in the Pakistani workplace, but it is a good common sense approach.

**CONFUSING MESSAGES:** Without realizing it, the management often sends a confusing array of messages to employees. A CEO who wanted his managers to work as a team. On the other hand, the reward for the best manager was a paid trip to Hawaii. He had a chart on his

## Strategy

notice board signifying where each of his managers currently stood for winning that trip. As expected, none of his managers would work as a team and were quite competitive. The CEO never actually understood the reason why!

The problem with confusing messages is that after a while, workers realize that when everything is a priority, nothing is a priority. They can waste large amounts of energy working on the wrong tasks, accomplishing the wrong results, and becoming extremely frustrated in the process.

One way out of this dilemma is that companies should regularly review all documentation — from goals to publications, salary reviews, etc — for consistency. And it doesn't hurt to ask employees about their understanding of the organization's

goals and priorities. When any confusion emerges, the firm should pinpoint the problem and correct it, so that what is communicated is more closely aligned with what is really wanted.

**MEETINGS:** If you are the average manager, you probably would have to attend quite a few meetings every month. How many times have you thought that you could have done something else more productive than attend the meeting. Meetings are vital to corporate success. They provide a controlling factor in achieving the organizational goals, but nothing saps the spirit like watching, powerless, as nothing is resolved, nothing is decided, and, of course, if it is just another part of the status quo. A big problem in Pakistani firms is that managers are just supposed to sit there like puppets, while the CEO or *seth* tells them exactly what he wants.

The following guidelines should help to ensure that employees look forward to meetings, rather than dread them:

- \* Ensure that the meeting is essential and that only the right people are invited.

- \* Prepare a result-oriented agenda, focusing on a few key items, and distribute it to all participants before the meeting.

- \* Expect the participants to prepare for the meeting, otherwise half-baked ideas, opinions and prejudices take the place of real decision-making.

- \* Use formats that encourage everyone to take part.

- \* Make sure that the meeting ends on time, that its effectiveness is evaluated and that action points are promptly followed up.

**HYPOCRISY:** Many Pakistani organizations say one thing, but practise something else. For example, they may say that they encourage feedback, but then not act on it. Many claim to trust their employees, but make them ask permission before they do anything at all, even before going for prayers, or they say they take people on merit, and then hire people with contacts

and influence. Employees then feel angry, frustrated and betrayed. The way out is for the firms to closely monitor the consistency between their words and deeds.

**CONSTANT CHANGE:** Change can be highly motivating when it is result-oriented, well planned and well communicated. But constant change is disruptive. It leaves employees feeling like pawns, forced to go in whatever direction the management decides is right at the moment. Other companies change excessively because of lack of direction or poor planning. Companies in Pakistan change with every new management that comes in place. Every new CEO has his own agenda and his own way of how the system should function, and the employees have to change with that. There is no proper long-term vision for the company.

Today's employees not only want to know what is happening, but also want to know why. When change is essential, the reasons should be clearly and promptly communicated to the employees. Firms should respond openly and honestly to employees' concerns.

**WITHHOLDING INFORMATION:** Only a few managers in Pakistan actually let their employees get the information they need, or appreciate the significance of it. Even if marketing people want the latest cashflows, they are accused of prying into company secrets. The information that people need to work with is never properly furnished to them. This leads to demotivation. But information is not just restricted to decision-making. What people do not know makes them nervous and is typically perceived as a threat. A small rumour of a person being laid off, for instance, can trigger widespread panic across the company. Who can work in such an atmosphere?

There is rarely any conspiracy to withhold information. Good organizations share virtually all

corporate information, including detailed financial-performance data, with employees. Communication can take the form of frequent senior management visits to work areas, monthly or quarterly state-of-the-company reports and even e-mail discussions.

**LOW STANDARDS:** The quickest way to kill the human spirit is to ask someone to do mediocre work. Many Pakistani organizations make decisions and design systems that rob employees of the right to take pride in workmanship. Time and cost constraints, driven by short-term production goals, are major reasons for quality compromises, and let us not forget the *seth* mentality that exists here. It is this mentality that most of all kills the motivation of the workplace. Thus, we have those suffering workers in factories, demotivated managers in the workplace, and, thus, high turnover rates and low quality standards.

Employees should be involved in goal setting and process improvement. When a quality problem does occur, firms should take a 'no-fault' approach and ask, 'what is wrong with our systems that caused employees to do substandard work?' The company should then empower a team to solve the problem. But nothing will send a more immediate and dramatic message about the management's commitment to quality than refusing to produce poor-quality goods.

**WHAT CAN BE DONE:** These are all common sense approaches to solving the management problems in Pakistani companies. The problem is that it is always the senior management that sets the culture of any organization and very few really want a change. But it is assured that once they start to focus attention on some of these demotivating factors, such factors will no longer exist. But, remember, it is unrealistic to try to address all demotivators at once. They should be attacked one at a time. Employees should help to

identify the high-potential areas through surveys or focus groups. When rewards for good performance are removed, behaviour is usually negatively affected. Generally be taken care of. If you want to really promote performance, then don't promote performance. It is smart at being 'productive'. Instead, go for 'excellence'. Nobody expects d



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Managerial

By Umair Mohsin

Dawn 22-1-82

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really promote merit,  
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to be eliminated completely. Not  
in a hurry, anyway. Some have  
been around for a long time and  
are too deeply entrenched. But  
when the management states  
unambiguously that particular  
demotivating conditions are no  
longer acceptable, and sets an  
appropriate example to that  
effect, the rest of the company

will usually get the message, and  
follow the lead.

Most of all, employee's  
involvement is vital. A broad-  
based team representing all  
major areas and levels of the  
company, can play a key role in  
coordinating the effort. This is  
something Pakistani manage-  
ments keep forgetting. □

